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# Standing in the Shadows of Niebuhr: U.S. President Barack Obama and Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism

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## Abstract

U.S. president Barack Obama has called renowned Christian moral and political theologian Reinhold Niebuhr a major intellectual influence. Although Obama's acknowledgement has been widely noted and discussed, a more systematic analysis and evaluation of the extent to which Obama has actually taken Niebuhr's Christian realism as a guiding framework for his presidency does not seem to exist yet. Such an inquiry would be interesting and important, given Niebuhr's status as greatest twentieth-century American theologian and highly influential public intellectual, and given the renewed academic interest in Niebuhr's work fueled by both a widespread uneasiness about George W. Bush's presidency and Obama's reminder of Niebuhr's authority. The present article - published on the 40th anniversary of Niebuhr's death - aims to make a contribution by applying, in a rather 'dynamic' way, a set of key themes of Niebuhr's Christian realism to Obama's personal development, rhetoric, and policy practice so far. It finds tentatively that Obama's reliance on Niebuhr is authentic and arguably more than superficial, yet does not appropriately incorporate the Niebuhrian core emphasis on sin. Thus, from a Niebuhrian perspective, Obama's politics lacks theological depth, appearing unduly liberal and national egoistic. This article ends by suggesting that Obama does not, or at least not yet, seem to be a truly Niebuhrian president. Total number of words: approx. 19600.

## Article body

### Introduction

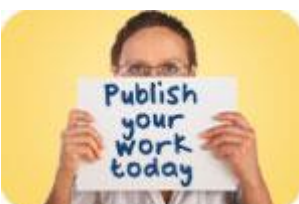
In 2007, during an interview about effective foreign aid programs in Africa, journalist David Brooks suddenly asked Democratic senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama if he had ever read Reinhold Niebuhr. Obama answered, apparently enthusiastically: 'I love him. He's one of my favorite philosophers' (Brooks 2007). And he quickly added:

'I take away the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away...the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism' (Obama, in Brooks 2007).

According to Brooks (2007), Obama thereby proved able to offer 'a pretty good off-the-cuff summary of Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*', a book regarded by many observers as one of the most important books, if not the most important one, ever written on U.S. foreign policy. Thus, Brooks (2007) suggested, it would be interesting to see whether Obama would prove able to design a practical (foreign) policy perspective as 'a way to apply his Niebuhrian instincts'.

Obama's response is remarkable indeed. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) is widely seen as the most influential American theologian of the twentieth century. The profound intellectual and public impact of his work, particularly from the 1930s through the 1960s, seems beyond dispute. While seeking the foundation of his political realism in the Christian religion and regarding the doctrine of original sin as the (only) empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith (Niebuhr 1965: 24), Niebuhr has been widely appreciated by religious and non-religious persons alike (see Jorstad 1990: 1091-1092). Since about 2005, a 'Niebuhr revival' has taken place in the United States, in the wake of widespread uneasiness about George W. Bush's neoconservative presidency, notably his decision to attack Iraq in 2003, and boosted by

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Obama's homage to Niebuhr. Of course, the Brooks interview is promising, but cannot suffice to show that Obama has indeed absorbed Niebuhr.

Is Obama a 'Niebuhrian president'? The World Wide Web has come to display a huge number of, mostly (very) short, articles that reflect on the extent of Niebuhr's influence on Obama's public statements. However, these writings, while often stimulating and useful, are generally fragmentary and pay little attention to Obama's policy practice, offering no comprehensive and systematic treatment of his presidency (up until now). Also, some scholarly works have appeared recently that draw upon the 'Obama-Niebuhr link' (Rice 2009; Harries and Platten 2010; Crouter 2010). However, these works, while very valuable in explaining why we need Niebuhr again after the 'hubris' and 'debacle' of the Bush years, go little further than taking Obama's declarations and presidency as a 'hook' to draw full attention to Niebuhr and to point out that Obama should indeed adopt Niebuhrian insights as president. What seems inexistent is a body of academic publications that analyze(s) and evaluate(s) Obama's presidency more or less thoroughly and comprehensively from a Niebuhrian perspective, assessing 'evidence pro' and 'evidence con'.<sup>[1]</sup>

In this article - published on the 40th anniversary of Niebuhr's death - I make an attempt to help analyze and evaluate Obama's presidency from a Niebuhrian Christian realist perspective.<sup>[2]</sup> My assumption is that the relevance of such a perspective may be taken as given - in view of both Niebuhr's intellectual authority and Obama's mentioning of him as a personal favorite - without further independent defense being needed. I do wish to stress that Niebuhr, in contrast to many other academics and intellectuals, is particularly relevant for 'real world' politics because of his insistence on experience-based, practical wisdom, or normative prudence, rather than on abstract theoretical reflection, for domestic and international political behavior (Novak 1991: 315-332; Coll 1999: especially 78, 92, 94, 97). Niebuhr is also relevant because he (as already noted) has been widely appreciated by Christians but also by persons who do not identify with his religion or identify with no religion at all. And as we may presume Obama to have internalized at least some ideas of Niebuhr, notably during his period as a community worker in Chicago, we may find an application of a Niebuhrian framework even more appropriate (Miller and Wolffe 2008). It is, then, important and legitimate to assess the extent to which Niebuhr's Christian realism has become influential again, because in the presidency of Bush (who saw Jesus Christ himself as his favorite philosopher) Niebuhr's authority seemed largely ignored.

Admittedly, to employ Niebuhrian ideas to try assessing Obama's presidency is a rather risky enterprise.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, first, Niebuhr is no longer alive today. Second, Obama (we must assume) has never claimed to be influenced by Niebuhr alone, having also mentioned philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and theologian-philosopher Paul Tillich (a colleague and friend of Niebuhr's) as intellectual influences (Alter 2010: 303).<sup>[4]</sup> On the other hand, Obama's fondness for Niebuhr seems truly special. Third, even if one holds that Niebuhrian ideas could make a serious difference in practical politics, one should not overestimate what a single president can do to achieve a state of affairs more Niebuhrian (cf. Bacevich 2008: 170-172). In fact, Obama took over the presidency in January 2009 under tough conditions: wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, rough regimes in Iran and North Korea racing toward nuclear capacity, an economic recession, upcoming climate change negotiations and summits, and the high expectations that people all over the world had about the first African-American U.S. president. As Obama himself noted in his 4 November 2008 victory speech: 'For even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime - two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century' (quoted in Alter 2010: 39). On the other hand, Obama did promise, among other things, to shut down Guantánamo Bay, outlaw torture, battle for universal health care, address climate change, and end the war in Iraq. And fourth, at the time of completing this article, Obama's presidency is somewhat more than halfway in its first term, which is both rather short a period and already hard to capture in a single, even if lengthy, article. On the other hand, Jonathan Alter seems right to observe that, whatever their important new initiatives or midcourse adjustments in later years, American presidents 'set the tone for the rest of their presidency in Year One' (2010: viii). Consequently, we must acknowledge that one cannot demand a presidency such as Obama's to fit quite perfectly within Niebuhr's Christian realism (perfectionism being very un-Niebuhrian anyway), especially when it comes to deeds rather than words. We may expect no more than a reasonable fit. We must also acknowledge that the approach to be taken and the material to be assessed cannot be but rather selective and somewhat opinionated; I apologize for this in advance. This is so, although the article will particularly focus on 'critical' cases, that is, issues that Niebuhr, if he were alive now, would probably have, or could well have, found important.

In view of all this, I think it is best to proceed along the following guidelines. First, Obama's personal development and rhetoric should show Niebuhrian influence no less than to a high extent, at least implicitly, without including arguably major inconsistencies with Niebuhrian notions. Second, Obama's policies and actions should display real Niebuhrian influence at any rate, at least implicitly, without including arguably really great inconsistencies with Niebuhrian notions (so a standard lower than the one of the first guideline). Third, whatever its content, our conclusion has to be one about Obama's whole approach and, as such, qualitative and largely holistic (more so than our sub-conclusions). And fourth, it

should be acknowledged that the analysis below will stay incomplete, also because of reasons of space.[5] In short, this article is a first cut at best.

I shall start by formulating a set of Niebuhrian, Christian realist 'themes' by which Obama's presidency may be evaluated. Indeed, my concern with Niebuhr's thought is systematic, not historical (Niebuhr 1941, 1943; see also Minnema 1958; Veldhuis 1975). Next I shall examine to what extent the various dimensions of Obama's presidency - personality, speeches, domestic politics, and foreign politics - resonate with these key Niebuhrian themes, applied not statically but 'dynamically', that is, by taking possibly changed insights or circumstances into account.

### **Key themes of Niebuhr's Christian realism**

Niebuhr was no Biblical scholar or systematic theologian, but a moral and political theologian who asked how one should live and act, individually and collectively, in a fallen world. Importantly, Niebuhr's political ethics cannot be properly understood apart from its theological presuppositions (Gilkey 2001; Merkley 1975; Amstutz 2008). While his view of human nature and politics has been welcomed by many people who do not share his theology, Niebuhr himself always set the practical power of his ideas in a divine context that transcends all human actions and judgments. Theological ideas about creation, sin, judgment, and grace are pivotal to Niebuhr's realism (Lovin 2005: 461-462, 465). There can be no adequate account of the possibilities and limits of a just politics without a Christian conception of human history and life, as the ultimate cause of humanity's problems is not mere egoism and conflict, but, as Augustine taught, the universal and permanent presence of original sin (Niebuhr 1953b).

For Niebuhr, ethics and politics are ultimately distinct yet intricately related practically. As he wrote in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: 'Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises' (Niebuhr 1932a: 4). The responsible political leader, then, is a realist who values the influence of idealism and the permanent tension that results:

'The realistic wisdom of the statesman is reduced to foolishness if it is not under the influence of the foolishness of the moral seer. The latter's idealism results in political futility and sometimes in moral confusion, if it is not brought into commerce and communication with the realities of man's collective life. This necessity and possibility of fusing moral and political insights does not, however, completely eliminate certain irreconcilable elements in the two types of morality, internal and external, individual and social. These elements make for constant confusion but they also add to the richness of human life' (Niebuhr 1932a: 258).

Niebuhr's thought highlights the simultaneous occurrence of ethical, egoistic, and coercive elements in politics as a *relatively* autonomous sphere. While, then, full justice is unachievable in politics, the difference between more and less social justice, and between more and less individual selfishness, may mean 'differences between sickness and health, between misery and happiness' (Niebuhr 1941: 233-234, quotation 234). It is appropriate to make political judgments provisionally, while confronting important temporal challenges. Otherwise, politics could have no meaning for the Christian, and she would have to withdraw from it altogether, if only to avoid adventitiousness or even opportunism because of lack of ethical guidance (cf. Merkley 1975: 77-78, 161-166). Drawing on this basic Niebuhrian view of the relationship between ethics and politics, I now distinguish and elaborate seven Niebuhrian political-ethical themes.

First, as sin, power, and interest play a dominant role in political life, leadership should avoid utopianism and, rather than pursue some doctrine, compromise if necessary. Of utopianism in politics Niebuhr distinguished a 'hard' and a 'soft' form, which he both rejected. 'Hard utopianism' is 'the creed of those who claim to embody the perfect community and who therefore feel themselves morally justified in using every instrument of guile or force against those who oppose their assumed perfection' (Niebuhr 1947: 6). 'Soft utopianism' is 'the creed of those who do not embody perfection, but expect perfection to emerge out of the ongoing process of history' (Niebuhr 1947: 6). Hard utopianism, of which Stalinist communism is the historic example, is cruel and tyrannical, justifying massacre for the sake of utopia that actually will not arrive. Soft utopianism, notably embodied in the unsuccessful League of Nations with its doctrine of 'collective security' and the theme of those who, like Billy Graham, would overcome racial injustice simply by redeeming the hearts of men, is sentimental and irrelevant. It makes little sense to dream about an ideal world government without answering the question of how we could entice the Russians to accept its authority or how it could get past the U.S. Senate, or to ignore the tough institutional structures and conflicts of power that entrap the hearts of men. Both hard and soft utopianism fail for limiting the possibility of truly effective action built upon a realistic notion of human nature that recognizes the potential for human evil as well as the constrained possibilities of improving society (see Bartel 1999: 179; Shinn 1975: 88-89; Veldhuis: 1975: 89-90). For Niebuhr, we, Americans not in the last place, have an

obligation to see the world as it really is, not as we might like it to be, avoiding to try to redesign world order in accordance with our own values (Bacevich 2008: 7). The political leader cannot aim at moral perfection, but should continuously try to find some balance, uneasy as that always will be, between caution and tentativeness on the one hand and justice and moral ideals on the other.

Second, political leadership should advance moral realism (Jorstad 1990: 1094), thus not lapse into a strict realism that ignores the role of morality in decision making processes. While he believed that the political order, domestic and international, rests on a balance of power, Niebuhr refused to follow political scientist Hans Morgenthau (1954: 5, 12, 14) in the latter's tendency to underline the autonomy of the political sphere, especially internationally. Niebuhr (1965: 75-76, cf. 22) saw Morgenthau's 'political realism' as insufficiently aware of the 'residual force' of man's higher, albeit often corrupted, loyalties. Certainly, '[t]he selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability' (Niebuhr 1932a: 272), and 'the nation..., held together much more by force and emotion, than by mind' is the pre-eminent selfish community (Niebuhr 1932a: 88, cf. 89-94). And the state gives power to the nation's collective egotistic impulses, and presents the imagination of individuals with strong symbols of its distinct collective identity (Niebuhr 1941: 222). Yet, as Niebuhr saw it, Morgenthau's view of politics as a realm of 'amorality' (Fox 1985: 277) must be rejected. Thus, Niebuhr argued in *The Irony of American History*:

'Every nation must come to terms with the fact that, though the force of collective self-interest is so great, that [sic] national policy must be based upon it; yet also the sensitive conscience recognizes that the moral obligation of the individual transcends his particular community. Loyalty to the community is therefore tolerable only if it includes values wider than those of the community' (Niebuhr 1952: 36-37).

Niebuhr agreed with political realist George Kennan's post-war critique of American 'legalistic-moralistic' foreign policy as uncritically reliant on moral and constitutional schemes and having undesirable effects on other nations. Yet he rejected Kennan's solution of making the 'national interest' the yardstick of American diplomacy (again). For Niebuhr, such an obsession with American interests entailed an unjustified indifference toward the interests of others. Rather, what was needed is 'a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind"' (Niebuhr 1952: 147-149, quotation 148). While American wars will be strongly self-interested, Niebuhr also believed that no American war could be sustainable unless something more than its national interest is at stake. He once described the essence of statecraft as locating 'the point of concurrence between the parochial and the general interest, between the national and the international common good' (Niebuhr 1958: 41, quoted in Bacevich 2008: 174).

Crucially, the difference between Morgenthau's and Kennan's more collective egotistic realism on the one hand and Niebuhr's moral realism on the other lies in the religious, Christian perspective the latter had on national self-interest. National self-interest must figure in a realistic political ethics, but as a moral ideal it is repulsive. Niebuhr condemned moral justifications of collective egoism:

'collective pride [most conspicuously national pride: the] very essence of human sin is in it...In its whole range from pride of family to pride of nation, collective egotism and group pride are a more pregnant source of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride' (Niebuhr 1941: 226).

Indeed, prophetic religion originated in a conflict with national self-deification. All great Hebrew prophets challenged the simple identification between God and the nation, or the naïve confidence of the nation in its exclusive relation with God (Niebuhr 1941: 227). Significantly, Jesus himself rejected nationalistic particularism (Niebuhr 1943: 43-44). Religion, if applied humbly, thus not dogmatically, moralistically, or arrogantly, can powerfully counter egoistic impulses, and help to provide means that larger groups can examine their selfish impulses.

Third, there is the necessity of power in political action (cf. Amstutz 2008).[6] According to Niebuhr, without power, promoting or maintaining a civilized order simply cannot be done. Desired change can happen only by the acquisition and employment of power. If change is not taking place, the cause lies in the interests of the powerful. Once change does happen, we should not expect the golden age of peace and justice, but the cycle to repeat itself with other people in the position of the powerful (Niebuhr 1932a: 191-196; cf. Lovin 2005: 463-464). Evil in politics can only be contained through countervailing power. Unlike the religious idealists of his day, Niebuhr thought that rational dialogue or economic engagement could not mitigate Hitler's global threat. Instead, German Nazism, and later Soviet Communism, required a convincing deterrent. At the international level, the problem of order is really hard, because no central authority exists that could resolve conflicts among sovereign states. Therefore, Niebuhr argued that the only way of pursuing international order was by maintaining a fundamental balance of power among states.

Fourth, Niebuhr stressed the moral limits of political action (cf. Amstutz 2008). Because of the universality of sin, political decisions and actions inevitably involve partiality and self-interest. Partiality and pride occur

especially when decisions are grounded in moral principles. Since sin distorts all human enterprises, managing the future is impossible (cf. Niebuhr 1952: 72). Accordingly, political action must be restricted and modest in scope. Modest reform is preferable to pretentious projects, which are bound to make conditions more unjust. Injustices will increase when decisions are justified on moral grounds with no adequate consideration of the limits of human reason, the incompleteness of human wisdom, and the partiality of human behavior (cf. Niebuhr 1959: 287-299). American history is 'ironic', precisely because American aims are unconsciously betrayed by the collective behavior of its people and government (Niebuhr 1952).

As regards the present theme, Niebuhr was skeptical about the creation of domestic institutions that could permanently sustain a humane and prosperous society. Thus, his own defense of democracy was a cautious one. A free society should be promoted, but with modesty. Democracy happens to be the form of society in which both freedom and order are brought most successfully in mutual support. However, democracy is no perfect resolution to the problems of community and politics. Not an enthusiastic liberalism but a cautious yet hopeful Christian anthropology should ground democratic government, according to Niebuhr (1944). For foreign politics, the consequences of Niebuhr's pragmatic-theological defense of democracy are even far-reaching. Niebuhr thought it unwise (overambitious, unduly simplistic) to view democracy ideologically or religiously. More generally, since sin has even more harmful effects in the anarchic international environment than in domestic society, Niebuhr leaned towards pessimism about improving the human condition globally, at least in the foreseeable future. He saw world government as illusory, not only because he considered it utterly idealistic, but also because the shared values and commitments necessary for effective international institutions were absent globally. Even if world government were desirable, it would still not be attainable: governments are not created by constitutional fiat, and, much more seriously, governments have only limited efficacy in integrating a community. Whereas universalist religions and philosophies have helped to inculcate in the conscience of mankind a tentative sense of cosmopolitan obligation, this common moral sense has no immediate political relevance: the common convictions on particular issues of justice that political cohesion requires is (still) lacking globally (Niebuhr 1953a, cf. 1952: 136, 1959: 266, 277). Attempts to build global political institutions are unlikely to remedy international instability and chaos.

Fifth, there is the need for humility in political affairs, as political understanding is incomplete at best and human action always sinful (cf. Amstutz 2008). Pursuing justice domestically or internationally may dangerously lead to the sin of self-righteousness and pride. As sin permeates all agents and enterprises, policies should be defined carefully and pursued with humility. The political leader should cultivate an uncomfortable conscience, one of deep self-criticism, being aware that evil is present not only in the world, in 'them', but 'in us', too. Original sin, by tainting all perceptions, is the enemy of absolutes. Religion in politics, Niebuhr warned, could be a source of errors as well as wisdom and light. Its role should be to instill a sense of humility instead of a sense of infallibility (Schlesinger 2005). The Christian faith may serve as the basis of a free society by reinforcing humility, without which political tolerance cannot exist. Humility calls upon Americans in particular to see themselves without blinders. The enemy of humility is sanctimony, which promotes the conviction that American values and ideas are universal and that their nation serves providentially assigned purposes (Bacevich 2008: 7).

Sixth, there is the need for responsible political action (cf. Amstutz 2008). Niebuhr was deeply suspicious of overambitious, haughty political initiatives that hampered justice and harmed the common good. Alternatively, some moralists were so concerned with moral purity or perfectionism that they refused to face injustice and tyranny. However, according to Niebuhr's Christian realism, the quest for a peaceful, just international order necessitates morally inspired, courageous political action. A responsible attitude towards social problems requires us to 'translate' Jesus' pure love ethic and pacifism prudently towards the political context in which justice, not love, may be the highest ideal (Niebuhr 1932b), even if that means we have to sin ourselves and get our hands dirty. Following Augustine, Niebuhr (1953b) claimed that the only way to sustain security and civilization was by harnessing power in the service of social justice. Thus, although he warned people not to expect too much from political enterprises, Niebuhr also insisted on the importance of collective action for freedom and justice, as collective self-interest should not have the last word. And while warning constantly against American hubris or the deification of any nation-state, Niebuhr advocated a distinctive, even exceptional, global role for the United States, the world's leading state.

Seven, political leadership should display realistic firmness and hope. Consider what Niebuhr wrote in *The Nature and Destiny of Man; Volume II: Human Destiny*: 'The economic interdependence of the world places us under the obligation, and gives us the possibility, of enlarging the human community so that the principle of order and justice will govern the international as well as the national community' (Niebuhr 1943: 295). It is both 'fear' and 'hope' that drives us to this 'new and compelling task' of overcoming international anarchy towards a potentially better future for the globe (Niebuhr 1943: 295). However, idealists who foresee this new possibility naively ignore the old, stubborn problems of the political order. They think world government can be had without great power hegemony. According to Niebuhr, such hegemony is inevitable, and the peril of new imperialism is inherent in it. The best way to overcome this

danger is to arm all nations with constitutional power to resist dominant power enforcements. Indeed, 'the principle of the balance of power is implied in the idea of constitutional justice' (Niebuhr 1943: 295). Yet the central and organizing principle of power should not be feared excessively, and the central authority not be weakened, as an *organized* balance of power is needed to offset the dangers of anarchy. This being so, the new international community will not be constructed by pessimists who believe it impossible to move beyond the balance of power principle, or by cynics who would subject the world to imperial authority without regard to the injustices that flow inevitably from arbitrary and irresponsible power, or by idealists who falsely believe that a new level of historical development will emancipate history from these annoying troubles (Niebuhr 1943: 295-296). Instead, the new world is to be built by

'resolute men who "when hope is dead will hope by faith"; who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievements, good. There is no escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the Kingdom of God. History moves towards the realization of the Kingdom, but yet the judgment of God is upon every new realization' (Niebuhr 1943: 296).

While it does not lose sight of balance of power realism, this longer-term, international justice vision of Niebuhr's, it seems to me, is relevant for political leadership in an age of economic and institutional globalization, potential nuclear terrorism, and global climate change.

For a Niebuhrian president in personal development, word, and deed, all seven themes - (1) compromise instead of utopianism or doctrine; (2) moral realism; (3) necessity of power; (4) moral limits of political action; (5) need for humility; (6) responsible political action; (7) realistic firmness and hope - would seem highly important. Yet we would do well, I think, to attach special weight to the themes (1), (2), (5), and (6), without, of course, losing sight of the other three. When looking at the quotation taken from the 2007 Brooks interview rendered in the introduction, one could argue that it are especially these four themes that Obama has claimed to have taken away from Niebuhr (no 'naïve idealism'; no 'bitter realism'; 'we should be humble and modest'; no 'excuse for cynicism and inaction'). In doing so, he is actually supported by Niebuhr admirer Andrew Bacevich, even if the latter only refers to (2) and (5) explicitly (2008: 7). Remarkably, (1) and (2) together (no utopianism, but no realism without morality either), and (5) and (6) together (humility, yet also responsible action), represent two deep tensions within Niebuhr's overall political thought. Certainly, then, it will not be easy for someone to be a truly Niebuhrian president.

### **Assessing Obama's personal development and rhetoric**

Do Obama's personal development and rhetoric reveal high Niebuhrian impact and do they not include arguably major inconsistencies with Niebuhrian notions? I start by sketching some relevant features of Obama's personal development and rhetoric. Next I offer an assessment of these features from the perspective of the seven Niebuhrian themes presented above.

#### ***Personal development and rhetoric***

Obama is a self-proclaimed Christian (cf. Obama 2004, 2006; Remnick 2010: Ch. 4) who has declared to accept the Christian doctrine of sin. Thus, in an often cited interview in 2004 with Cathleen Falsani, a religion reporter for the Chicago Sun Times, Obama stated not only that he was a 'Christian' with a 'deep faith', but also that he believed in 'sin'. Asked by Falsani to explain what 'sin' is, Obama answered: 'Being out of alignment with my values.' [7] Since then, the latter remark, to which Obama does not seem to have come back (publicly), has become widely known as 'Obama's definition of sin' (and has often been criticized for deviating from the Christian view of original sin).

In his highly detailed Obama biography *The Bridge*, David Remnick (2010) does not mention the name Niebuhr even once. [8] Yet he draws a picture of Obama's life and rise that is highly relevant for assessing the extent of Niebuhrian influence in Obama on his way to the presidency. Remnick (2010) portrays Obama as someone who: [9] started as an 'idealist who believed in economic equality', learned 'notions of fairness and equality', but was 'never the least bit doctrinaire' (104, cf. 218); wanted 'to help people who are disadvantaged' (105); studied 'political science - particularly foreign policy, social issues, political theory, and American history' (113) - 'with a concentration in international relations' (116); was 'genuinely concerned with the plight of the poor' (115); was a 'young idealist' (119), but 'not a radical' (121); wanted 'to be effective' in his days as a community organizer (162); displayed 'caution, lots of caution', and embraced 'completely...the need for power to get anything done' (164, cf. 301); cannot be interpreted

'without thinking of the power factor' (175); 'want[s] to go into public life' to become 'someone who synthesizes and compromises interests' (178); 'was angry about how people suffered, the injustice of that kind of poverty' (169); rejected 'suspicion of politics', as 'to disdain politics' is 'to disdain "a major arena of power"' (181); 'has...a problem-solving orientation' and is 'not...powerfully driven by an a-priori framework, so what emerges is quite pragmatic and even tentative' (196); was 'so strong' in displaying 'a certain

humility' as a law teacher at Harvard (205); was 'not relativistic, but principled and humble at the same time' (206); showed '[m]aturity, not ideology' (206, cf. 210); 'was instinctively wary of ideology' (433); displayed 'moral seriousness' as a Chicago university teacher, encouraging 'students to think not just about the law, but about justice, truth, and morality' (264); 'was vaguely on the left' (275), but 'hardly on the left wing of his party' (338); wanted 'to inspire a renewal of morality in politics' (282); in the Illinois State Senate, 'shed his rookie idealism and now spoke readily of his willingness to compromise', an attitude that became to characterize 'Obama's pragmatic view of politics straight into the Oval Office' (304, cf. 427); became 'a pragmatist, a politician' (535); 'wanted to pass landmark legislation covering health care, economic justice for the poor, job training, and many other issues' (318); felt that 'the truth is, if you want to be able to get things accomplished politically, you've got to work with them', those people that you see as your enemies (329); 'is a very political guy, very calculating', and wants somehow to act in ways 'that actually improve people's lives' (331); was 'an early opponent of the Iraq war' (370), stating at his 2002 anti-war Chicago Federal Plaza speech 'not [to be] opposed to war in all circumstances', but merely to oppose such a 'dumb war', a 'rash war' (346-347); 'had developed a penchant for compromise', and realized that not being 'smart' but having 'power', so that you can 'control the gavel', makes the difference in getting things done (350); acquired a 'reputation as a left-of-center politician skilled in the arts of compromise - especially his work on health care, child-care benefits, and judicial and ethics reform' (370); was naturally inclined to focus on 'hope' (393, 494), and rejected a 'politics of cynicism' in favor of a 'politics of hope' (399, cf. 400); when running on behalf of Illinois for U.S. Senate, acknowledged that 'to be a successful politician you had to make a few compromises along the way' and 'rarely failed to make them' (408); was 'both a progressive and a cautious coalition-builder' (422); did not seem a 'liberal interventionist or a Kissingerian realist or any other kind of ideological "ist" except maybe a "consequentialist"', favoring in foreign policy 'what worked' (424); 'could get in a room with foreign-policy realists and idealists and somehow transcend the battle and reconcile the two sides'; was never inclined towards '[p]assionate moralism' (430); was 'wary of what he saw as emotional absolutism', especially as regards foreign policy (430); did not leap toward 'the neocon agenda or even the recent formulation of the liberal internationalist agenda' (430, cf. 436-437); 'is a kind of practical idealist...reading Fanon and other leftists when he was young, but...moved beyond that' towards 'realism and logic' (431); 'could be shrewd when balancing the impulse of principle and the realities of politics and career' (434); sees his values as 'deeply rooted in the progressive tradition, the values of equal opportunity, civil rights, fighting for working families, a foreign policy that is mindful of human rights, a strong belief in civil liberties, wanting to be a good steward for the environment, a sense that the government has an important role to play, that opportunity is open to all people and that the powerful don't trample on the less powerful', being 'agnostic [and] flexible on how we achieve [our] ends' (437); denounces 'both the intolerance of the religious right and the failure, often, of the secular left to respect the value of religious faith in the lives of others' (440); attempts 'to reconcile the constitutional requirement for separation of church and state with recognition of sincere religious impulse for the social good' (441); knew well the difference between 'speaking out in a tradition of protest, the prophetic tradition' and 'that as a politician he could not always afford the same liberties' (474); 'was never remotely a radical; as a student, lawyer, professor, and politician he had always been a gradualist - liberal in spirit, cautious in nature' (547).

As regards Obama's rhetoric, I focus on his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance address, given in Oslo on 10 December 2009. Brooks (2009) may be right to state that Obama's 'Oslo speech was the most profound of his presidency, and maybe his life'. In any event, this speech is seen by many commentators as truly Niebuhrian, even though Niebuhr - perhaps to Obama's credit - was not mentioned at all (cf. Crouter 2010: 135). Thus, it seems most worthwhile to discuss it somewhat extensively.[10] Facing a Norwegian audience that may have harbored serious doubts about his decision one week earlier to send an extra thirty thousand troops to Afghanistan, Obama emphasized the persistence of violent conflict, the moral strength of a non-violent attitude, yet also the special moral responsibility of a state leader such as himself to fight evil threats, if necessary by going to war:

'We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations - acting individually or in concert - will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified. I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in this same ceremony years ago: "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there is nothing weak - nothing passive - nothing naïve - in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King. But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism - it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason' (Obama 2009b).

Obama also said that the military power of the United States, rather than the juridical impact of international institutions, has been crucial to post World War II global security, explaining this on the basis



of American enlightened self-interest, while pointing out the tragic nature of war:

'[I]t was not simply international institutions - not just treaties and declarations - that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea, and enabled democracy to take hold in places like the Balkans. We have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will. We have done so out of enlightened self-interest - because we seek a better future for our children and grandchildren, and we believe that their lives will be better if other peoples' children and grandchildren can live in freedom and prosperity. So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace. And yet this truth must coexist with another - that no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy [and] is never glorious...So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths - that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly' (Obama 2009b).

Consequently, for Obama, we should not turn a blind eye to our own fallibility and tendency to act badly, even when having good intentions, yet also accept the moral responsibility to improve the human condition as much as we can, guided and inspired by the ideals of non-violence and love:

'Adhering to [the] law of love has always been the core struggle of human nature. For we are fallible. We make mistakes, and fall victim to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil. Even those of us with the best of intentions will at times fail to right the wrongs before us. But we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place. The non-violence practiced by men like Gandhi and King may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance, but the love that they preached - their fundamental faith in human progress - that must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey. For if we lose that faith - if we dismiss it as silly or naïve; if we divorce it from the decisions that we make on issues of war and peace - then we lose what's best about humanity. We lose our sense of responsibility. We lose our moral compass...We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us, and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of depravation, and still strive for dignity. Clear-eyed, we can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace. We can do that - for that is the story of human progress; that's the hope of all the world; and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on Earth' (Obama 2009b).

During this speech, called by one commentator 'Obama's eloquent espousal of Niebuhrian political theory' (Crouter 2010: 135), Obama made two further remarks worth to be mentioned separately. Thus, first, 'I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later' (Obama 2009b). And second, 'security', which includes 'economic security' and so 'freedom from want' as well as 'freedom from fear', is

'also why the world must come together to confront climate change. There is little scientific dispute that if we do nothing, we will face more drought, more famine, more mass displacement - all of which will fuel more conflict for decades. For this reason, it is not merely scientists and environmental activists who call for swift and forceful action - it's military leaders in my own country and others who understand our common security hangs in the balance' (Obama 2009b).

As regards this last quote, Obama himself has named climate change a policy priority, insisting strongly on the need for clean energy. In his speech on climate change at the United Nations (UN) on 22 September 2009 (so earlier that year), Obama also stressed the seriousness, urgency, and growth of the climate change threat to the security of each nation and all peoples and the necessity of international cooperation, stating further:

'And yet, we can reverse it...And I am proud to say that the United States has done more to promote clean energy and reduce carbon pollution in the last eight months than at any other time in our history...Most importantly, the House of Representatives passed an energy and climate bill in June that would finally make clean energy the profitable kind of energy for American businesses and dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions...[W]e will meet our responsibility to future generations...We must seize the opportunity to make Copenhagen a significant step forward in the global fight against climate change...Yes, the developed nations that caused much of the damage to our climate over the last century still have a responsibility to lead...But those rapidly-growing developing nations that will produce nearly all the growth in global carbon emissions in the decades ahead must do their part as well...We cannot meet this challenge unless all the largest emitters of greenhouse gas pollution act together. There is no other way...We seek an agreement that will allow all nations to grow and raise living standards without endangering the planet. By developing and disseminating clean technology and sharing our know-how, we can help developing nations leap-frog dirty energy technologies and reduce dangerous emissions' (Obama 2009a).

And in May 2010, Obama held a speech at Solyndra, a California solar manufacturing plant, where he declared:

'Climate change poses a threat to our way of life - in fact, we're already beginning to see its profound and costly impact...We're not going to be able to sustain this kind of fossil fuel use. This planet can't sustain it. Think about when China and India - where consumers there are starting to buy cars and use energy the way we are. So we've known that we've had to shift in a fundamental way, and that's true for all of us...So that's why we've placed a big emphasis on clean energy. It's the right thing to do for our environment, it's the right thing to do for our national security, but it's also the right thing to do for our economy' (Obama 2010).

### **Assessment**

Let us now turn to the task of applying our set of Niebuhrian Christian realist themes to Obama's pre-presidential personal development and presidential rhetoric. First, then, do Obama's personal development and rhetoric as presented above expose an attitude of extensive compromise instead of utopianism or doctrine, with no major inconsistency involved? In Remnick's account of Obama's life and rise, one can detect much that positively contributes to the presence of such an attitude. Obama is portrayed as a practical idealist instead of a passionate moralist, as someone who believes in justice and the economic rights of the poor, yet rejects doctrinal and ideological thinking and acting in favor of pragmatically and tentatively aiming for compromise, problem-solving, effectiveness, (relatively) good consequences, and so for 'what works' politically. We may especially note Obama's first moment condemnation of the Iraq war, when he opposed the ideological neoconservatism of his predecessor Bush. In his Nobel Prize speech, Obama emphasizes that evil and violence exist in our complex world and really cannot be eradicated, and that political leaders - notably himself as the leader of the world's most powerful state - must face the world 'as it is', so cannot rely on international institutions for global stability and security. One thing seems questionable: Obama's belief in (presumably genuine, that is, non-self-interested) humanitarian intervention does not seem consistent with Niebuhrian anti-utopianism, as that will arguably entail a warning for the unintended consequences that result from well-intentioned intervention in strange societies. On the other hand, this consistency does not entail a major one. Thus, we may conclude that the answer to our first question about compromise instead of utopianism or doctrine is yes.

Second, do Obama's personal development and rhetoric as sketched above expose an attitude of high moral realism, without major inconsistency involved? In Remnick's account, one can find much realism in Obama that is moral as well. Obama, the foreign policy and international relations student, comes to the fore as neither a neoconservative idealist, nor a liberal internationalist or interventionist, nor a die-hard realist, but as someone who wants to combine realism with moral idealism. While Obama speaks out for domestic justice in terms of a more equal standard of living, job insecurity reduction, and social insurance schemes within the limits of what is realistic, he also condemns Bush's Iraq war on realistic-moral grounds. As regards his Nobel Prize speech, speaking about the issue of warfare, it is clear that Obama who, as a politician, a head of state, a commander-in-chief, feels that he cannot pursue the same non-violent practices as those of the head of a movement, like King or Gandhi, does accept the influence of the 'moral seer' - the 'North Star' that we should take as our 'moral compass' - and the resulting uneasiness. Also, Obama stresses U.S. 'enlightened self-interest' instead of international institutions as the major cause of post-World War II global security. As regards Obama's belief in (genuine) humanitarian intervention, I think that here we do not find a contribution to an attitude that is moral in a realist sense. Actually, Obama's argument that '[i]naction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later' is more reminiscent of Michael Walzer's 'just war' defense of humanitarian intervention (Walzer 2004: 74) than of Niebuhr's 'moral realism'.

More importantly, however, it is questionable whether Obama's rhetoric about climate change - after all, a huge threat to global as well as American security and as such highly relevant from an updated Niebuhrian perspective (cf. Bacevich 2008) - shows moral realism. Note first that during both the Nobel Prize speech and the earlier UN speech Obama had *the* opportunities to show moral realism as regards climate change. To be sure, Obama acknowledges the strong scientific evidence involved (cf. also 2006: 168), argues that global action to deal with it is needed, acknowledges (to a certain extent) that the developed countries have caused most of the damage and therefore should take the lead, and states that the United States cannot sustain its kind of fossil fuel use as the planet cannot bear it. Yet we must look further. Niebuhr, of course, could never have heard of 'global climate change', as that only became known during the 1980s. Now, we know with virtual certainty that it is caused primarily by carbon dioxide emissions resulting from burning fossil fuels (IPCC 2007), with the United States as the leading polluter historically.[11] Yet, already in the 1930s, Niebuhr showed critical awareness about the problematic human inclination to exploit nature beyond the requirements of subsistence and the satisfaction of 'human needs' towards the satisfaction of all 'human wants' (Niebuhr 1932a: 1). And during the 1950s, Niebuhr complained about America's ever-

expanding economy in which the pressure was on Americans to consume as much as they might desire. Niebuhr criticized 'a culture which makes "living standards" the final norm of the good life' (1952: 57, cf. 55, 116). Niebuhr wrote disapprovingly of the American 'culture soft and vulgar, equating joy with happiness and happiness with comfort' (1958: 125, quoted in Bacevich 2008: 9). As Bacevich (2008: 9) concludes, sustaining the American way of life, liberty, and happiness at home has required Americans increasingly look abroad for oil, credit, or the availability of cheap consumer goods. Thus, from the perspective of Niebuhrian moral realism, one would expect Obama to reflect, first and foremost, on what his own country in particular is going to contribute - as regards American reduction targets, the value of economic growth, fossil fuels consumption, and the American way of life as a threat to the climate. Obama, however, proceeds quickly and conveniently to the claim that all states, developing as well as developed, have to cooperate and contribute, implying that in the case of climate change coordinated international action can be successful. And in his Solyndra speech, he emphasized - thereby turning things on their head in a way - that climate change threatens the American way of life, having already declared in his Inaugural Address of January 20, 2009, immediately after saying to work against global warming, that '[w]e will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense' (quoted in White House 2010: 17). And Obama, his critique of America's enormous fossil fuel use notwithstanding, has shown no serious sign of attempting to break with the link between freedom, abundance, consumption, and access to large quantities of cheap oil, even if he claims to want clean energy and less foreign oil dependency. Rather, he optimistically holds that all nations can grow and raise living standards without endangering the planet with the help of new technology - as if there is no need to even discuss accepting inconvenience or making sacrifices in order to simultaneously serve national security and the global good (cf. Bacevich 2008: 173, 180-181). Possibly a major cause for this neglect is to be found in Obama's at worst dangerous, at best rather simplistic conception of sin as 'being out of alignment with my values', as that would make it hard for him to speak somewhat (more) vigilantly about American economic self-interest.[12] In conclusion, in view of the great importance of the climate change issue[13] and the apparent tension between Obama's reflections and our present Niebuhrian theme, I would say that a balanced answer to our second question regarding moral realism, understood dynamically, cannot be yes, but tends towards no.

Third, do Obama's personal development and rhetoric as sketched above show very serious awareness of the need for power, free from major inconsistency? Remnick's picture of Obama is very clear in this respect: one cannot simply understand him without the power factor. Indeed, the need for power is why Obama appreciated politics and went into it in the first place. To him, it is power that makes the difference in achieving at least some justice. His Nobel Prize speech makes clear that, for Obama, in the international sphere power is crucial to stop evil forces. When reason, treaties, declarations, and negotiations do not work, a head of state, a commander-in-chief, may have to rely on military power. As Niebuhr would have concurred, World War II victory and post-World War II global security would not have been without the United States having used its power. Thus, the answer to our third question regarding the need for power is plainly yes.

Fourth, do Obama's personal development and rhetoric as sketched above show very serious awareness of moral limits of political action, with no major inconsistency involved? While Remnick's account does not reveal much awareness of this theme in Obama, it mentions Obama's early rejection of the - arguably overambitious - Iraq war as 'dumb' and 'rash', and points to his long-time 'gradualist', non-radical but cautiously liberal, attitude. In his Nobel Prize speech, Obama states that politics does not have the capacity to eliminate violent conflict, acknowledges that applying violence can only be narrowly successful, and concedes that war, even when called for, remains an expression of foolishness. On the other hand, it seems dubious whether Obama's belief in humanitarian intervention is not at odds with the present Niebuhrian theme, as humanitarian interventions do not clearly have modest goals and are susceptible to self-sin. However, to say that this entails a major inconsistency seems too far-fetched, I think. Thus, the answer to our fourth question regarding the limits of political action seems to be yes.

Fifth, do Obama's personal development and rhetoric as sketched above show extensive attention for the need for humility, without major inconsistency involved? In Remnick's portrait of Obama, humility does not play a serious role, although it mentions the sense of humility that Obama, who was also principled, displayed as a teacher of law. As regards his Nobel Prize speech, Obama gives expression to humility in several ways. Thus, he acknowledges the immediate significance of Martin Luther King's life work for his own position. He acknowledges the tragic nature of warfare, stressing that this is so because we ourselves, even with the best of intentions, are fallible, make mistakes, and cannot always resist the temptations of power, pride, and evil. However, Obama's remarks about climate change seem problematic. To say that he is 'proud' about what his administration has done to cut greenhouse gas emissions in his first eight months - more than ever before in American history (actually not very surprising and impressive) - is at odds with Niebuhrian humility as sin-related. In focusing on the need for global action and the need to shift American energy use from fossil fuels to clean energy, he seems to miss the opportunity to help Americans see themselves without blinders in this regard. Remarkably, during the 1979 energy crisis, president Jimmy Carter declared (thereby putting his 1980 re-election at risk) that the risky American dependence on energy was only a symptom of a deeper problem: its idea of freedom as grounded in the infinite quest for

more while exalting narrow self-interest. For Carter, also a Niebuhr devotee (albeit one criticized for his uncompromising leadership style), true freedom meant living in accordance with permanent values. Seeing dependence on energy and foreign oil as a major test-case, he summoned Americans to conserve: take no unnecessary trips, use carpools or public transportation whenever you can, park your car one extra day per week, obey the speed limit, and set your thermostats to save fuel. For Carter, such sacrifice might be a good thing: for the sinner, some sort of penance must necessarily precede redemption. Bacevich (2008: 15-66), from whom I borrow this observation about Carter, suggests the unique Niebuhrism of Carter's position of moral renewal and critical self-awareness. Unfortunately, all of Carter's successors have treated oil dependence as an integral part of American life, thereby ignoring pressing questions about the costs the dependence entailed. Based on Niebuhr's own view of American culture and Carter's attempt to help Americans to see themselves without blinders, and given the role of America as the greatest contributor to greenhouse pollution and its dangers, I think that a dynamic application of the Niebuhrian theme of humility would require Obama to have expressed at least some criticism concerning the American way of life and its values. Again, a major cause for neglect in this regard may be found in his simplistic conception of sin as 'being out of alignment with my values', as that may have made it impossible for him to speak somewhat (more) critically about American - indeed his own - values. In conclusion, I would say that the answer to our fifth question regarding humility is closer to no than to yes.

Sixth, do Obama's personal development and rhetoric as sketched above show great sense of the need for responsible political action, free from major inconsistency? In Remnick's account, we can see how much importance Obama attaches to governmental action when it comes to achieving health care legislation, economic justice, job training, a healthy environment, and other domestic issues. As regards the Nobel Prize speech, Obama is even very explicit about the need for responsible action in the international domain. Thus, Obama emphasized the presence of evil, the limits of reason, and human imperfectionism, while at the same time stressing the necessity and possibility of collective action to implement human ideals. Also, he underlines U.S. responsibility taking in achieving post-World War II global security. Perhaps most impressively, after having stressed the need for humility in peace-oriented action (see above), Obama immediately (like in his answer to Brooks's question about whether he had ever read Niebuhr) goes on to explain that we still have the possibility and obligation to pursue policies that improve the human condition, guided by the love preached and faith explicated by people like Gandhi and King. The presence of war and the risk of failing ourselves do not mean that we cannot and should not strive for peace. If we ignore all this, he says, 'we lose our sense of responsibility'. Clearly, for Obama, we should reject the moral purity of pacifism in favor of the employment of force and warfare when diplomacy cannot do the necessary work (a point he also stressed in his 2002 Chicago Federal Plaza speech). Indeed, we have to fight people who do awful deeds, but we should also recognize that in doing so, we ourselves engage in evil things and might even fail, imperfect as we are as humans (cf. Remnick 2010: 348, 583). War is sometimes needed to confront evil, but that this must always be a measured undertaking, entered with a sense of human tragedy and not as a holy crusade (Crouter 2010: 135, cf. Alter 2010: 226). Also, Obama regards love not as the highest political ideal yet still as essential, inspirational, and states that justice (and dignity) can, and should, be striven for. We may even note that Obama confirms Niebuhr's own rejection of pacifism in favor of support for armed intervention in Europe during World War II. As regards (genuine) humanitarian intervention, it seems unclear whether this is consistent with responsible political action in Niebuhr's sense. As regards climate change, however, we run into problems again. As far as I can see, by stressing that 'the world must come together' to confront the problem, and by focusing on the need for clean energy (thereby suggesting that technology is to solve the problem), Obama does not express awareness of a *special* responsibility of America and so of himself as this nation's leader. While, of course, Americans cannot curb climate change alone, unless the United States acts, this global threat cannot be effectively addressed at all. On the other hand, I would not want to say that a decisively major inconsistency is involved. In conclusion, I would say that the answer to our sixth question regarding the need for responsible global action is closer to yes than to no, albeit slightly so.

Seventh, do Obama's personal development and rhetoric as sketched above show an approach of high realistic firmness and hope, with no major inconsistency involved? Remnick draws attention to Obama's politics of hope, and mentions his rejection of a politics of cynicism in favor of such a politics of hope. In his Nobel Prize speech, Obama explicitly denies that saying that force may sometimes be necessary means giving in to cynicism, seeing it instead as recognition of the limits of realism. Also, he expresses his belief that responsible leadership (see above) will lead to 'human progress', which is 'the hope of all the world' and now 'must be our work here on Earth'. On the whole, Obama rejects pessimism, cynicism, and idealism, arguably embracing realism and a willingness not to name good what is actually evil instead. As regards climate change, however, here Obama fails to express a vision of global justice, one that gives at least some hope to people in poor countries harmed by the effects of climate change. Indeed, he shows no firmness to undertake a serious, long-term - and presumably costly, inconvenient, and sacrificial - national effort towards a post-fossil fuel economy (cf. Bacevich 2008: 180-181, cf. 173). Thus, the answer to our seventh question regarding realistic firmness and hope seems, again, slightly closer to yes than to no.[14]

I conclude that, as regards his personal development and presidential rhetoric, Obama has shown

significant, yet not sufficiently deep, Niebuhrian influence; thus, he does not demonstrate Niebuhrian influence to a high extent, free from major inconsistency. His rather subjectivistic view of the nature of sin may have limited him from digesting Niebuhr's Christian realism more fully and with more moral realism and humility as two themes of special importance.

### **Assessing Obama's policies and actions**

Do Obama's policies and actions show genuine Niebuhrian influence and do they not include arguably really great inconsistencies with Niebuhrian notions? Again, I start by sketching some relevant features of Obama's policies and actions. Subsequently, I offer an assessment of these features from the perspective of our Niebuhrian themes.

#### ***Policies and actions***

According to Remnick (2010: 582), several of Obama's accomplishments during his first presidential year were related to what did *not* happen. As a result of government interventions, neither the banking system nor the automobile industry collapsed. By most accounts, under the guidance of Obama and his economic team, the country had not only avoided a depression, it was, erratically and unequally, emerging from recession (albeit facing both ten per-cent unemployment and investment bankers' justifying their extravagant bonuses). Remnick (2010: 582) mentions several other achievements as well. Thus, Obama set a firm timetable to withdraw American troops from Iraq. He moved against discriminatory policies toward homosexuals in the military. Notwithstanding the pleas of some of his advisers, Obama started by calling on Congress to improve the health care system, going further in that effort than any president in a half century. On the other hand, Obama failed to keep his promise to close Guantánamo within a year.<sup>[15]</sup> Also, Obama committed more than thirty thousand new troops to Afghanistan, which did not prevent the announcement that he, after less than nine months in office, had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace (cf. for a detailed account Alter 2010). As regards Iraq, Alter (2010: 228-229) recalls that this went 'surprisingly well': the withdrawal from Iraq proceeded roughly according to schedule all the year 2009 long.

From a Niebuhrian perspective, Obama's *Health Care Reform Bill* is noteworthy. Alter (2010: viii) even speaks of a 'big victory on health care'. He recalls that for a while it seemed as if health care reform would never get started in early 2009, because of strong Congress resistance, the economic recession, and political advisors who almost unanimously feared that pushing health care in 2009 would crash the system and risk defeat (Alter 2010: 113-116). Yet, Alter continues, Obama was 'operating on history suggesting that big initiatives introduced early in an administration tended to have a better chance of passage than those put forward later, as a president's popularity declined' (2010: 115). Obama was ready to pursue the project at the cost of popularity and even the risk of not getting re-elected, unemployment and 'Afghanistan' being much serious issues for voters (Alter 2010: 244). Whereas twentieth century Democratic presidents failed to establish national health insurance, Obama did have success (Alter 2010: 249-250), as the House passed the bill and so Obama's dream of health care reform was fulfilled. The law arose within a power battle that was not just one of Democrats versus Republicans, as also within the Democratic camp there were disagreements. Obama, then, made concessions towards hesitating Democrats, accepting the rule that no government money is to be spent on abortion. Eventually, in 2010, sufficient power was organized to get the law accepted by means of majority vote. The reform undoubtedly strengthened social and political polarization within the United States, but it seemed power politics that ended a stalemate (Trouw 2010a). In 1993, the Clinton approach was to design the ideal plan, put it before Congress, and say: pass it. In 2009, the Obama strategy was to say: we have such huge health costs, we need to cover more people, and I shall begin with whatever reforms Congress is willing to put in front of me (Lovin, quoted in News & Communications 2010).

In 2009, Obama announced at a speech in Prague that he strove for a nuclear-free world - adding, though, that as long as nuclear weapons are around, America will be certain to have a strong deterrent itself - but that he did not see it happen during his own lifetime (Alter 2010: 352, 354). Yet, one year later, there was a new Start Treaty, signed, again, in Prague, which foresees a reduction of the number of American and Russian strategic nuclear warheads with 30 per cent to 1550 each and a halving, for both countries, of the number of missiles and airplanes that can carry nuclear heads. This treaty was ratified by the U.S. Senate at the end of 2010 (see also below). Also, in a new strategy, the United States will limit the potential targets of an eventual nuclear attack (cf. Trouw 2010b).

Whereas for years the United States had unsuccessfully called on Iran to stop its nuclear program, Obama sought merely to prevent it from weaponizing its nukes. Because Iran had no oil refineries, it possessed an understandable need for nuclear power. For Obama, the world could accept this as long as reprocessing enriched uranium was done outside Iran, most likely in Russia. As even Iranian 'liberals' did not want their nation to abandon its nuclear program, a policy of 'limitation with inspection' seemed to make more sense

than ultimatums for total dismantlement (Alter 2010: 355). Presumably, neither sanctions nor pressure for inspections would yield much until the political situation clarified. Now the Iranian leaders simply offered fake concessions and stall for time with diplomatic hints and feints. Yet the indirect impact of the new American policy was the end of a thirty-year era in which any time the Iranian regime got difficult America 'simply played the "Great Satan" card. By extending a hand to the clenched fist of Tehran, Obama helped expose the bankruptcy of the regime to its own people' (Alter 2010: 356).

After having lost the House of Representatives (albeit not the Senate) to the Republicans in the 2010 Congress elections, Obama attempted to continue his overall approach the best he could. This started with a compromise he took about tax law. He granted the Republicans what they wanted, extending the tax cuts from the Bush period for everyone, including the rich. In return, he received number of extra tax cuts and social benefits, which came down to a stimulation program for the economy financed with budget deficits. Also, to acquire acceptance of the Start Treaty, Obama conducted some horse trading - extra money for nuclear weapons - with which not all Democrats were pleased. However, in doing so, and in contrast to (other) Democratic presidents Carter and Clinton, he did acquire the desired disarmament treaty (Den Hond 2010).

Already in January 2009, soon after his inaugural address, Obama attempted to make climate change a policy priority. From a (dynamically interpreted) Niebuhrian perspective, given the enormous impact of climate change on present and future generations worldwide, and the similarities it has with nuclear weapons as a threat for human civilization (even if its threat to security worldwide is not as immediate), Obama's practical treatment of this topic deserves special attention (cf. also Bacevich 2008; Harries and Platten 2010). By most accounts, the December 2009 Copenhagen UN Climate Change Summit was a failure, also because of the American attitude. Yet Alter (2010: 358-362) offers a rather sympathetic interpretation of Obama's performance, stressing the problem of Congress resistance and the promise of America-China negotiations. Thus, European states, who committed themselves to emission ceilings, could not understand why America did not join them in making legally binding commitments. However, Alter writes, the answer was that doing so without Congress would create another 'Kyoto' situation, in which the United States could not endorse its pledges. Thus, with the Senate blocking action on the cap-and-trade program that had passed the House, Obama faced the prospect of going to Copenhagen empty-handed. Moreover, the European states blithely delegated the hard negotiating work to the United States. Rapidly developing states such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa felt the double standard of an emissions agreement that would restrict their economic growth to be unfair: the United States and other developed countries had not had to worry about dirty energy when they were building their economies in the last two centuries (Alter 2010: 358-359). In a short speech to the plenary session, Obama stressed the need for all nations to set goals, create a mechanism for measuring progress, and help the most vulnerable countries to adapt to climate change. America's own commitment, he said, was to cut carbon emissions 17 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050, a goal that would require the conversion to a clean energy economy he had promised to begin (Alter 2010: 359-360). Eventually, there was a negotiating America-China, 'G2'-like conversation that focused on convincing China to voluntarily list its targets and emissions in an international registry. This would at any rate be the first time China accepted global norms of transparency and accountability of any kind, and so Obama and secretary of state Hillary Clinton tried hard to make China commit itself to the registry. The result was a rather uncertain deal: the sincerity of the Chinese commitment would depend on their obscure internal politics and take time to ascertain, though of course the same could be said of the United States (Alter 2010: 361). Even so, Obama later said to the U.S. delegates:

'It adds up to a significant accord - one that takes us farther than we have ever gone before as an international community...We can embrace this accord, take a substantial step forward, and continue to refine it and build upon its foundation. We can do that, and everyone who is in this room will be part of an historic endeavor - one that makes life better for our children and grandchildren' (Obama, quoted in Alter 2010: 362).

The nonbinding Copenhagen Accord was ratified (Alter 2010: 362). Nevertheless, in January 2011, Carol Browner's departure as the White House's top advisor on climate change is said to reflect president Obama's limited ability to push his clean-energy agenda through Congress. Legislation to impose cap-and-trade restrictions on carbon emissions failed in the Senate after passing the House (Chipman and Snyder 2011).

However, German journalist Christian Schwägerl (2009) - thereby giving voice to a European disappointment - has argued that Obama is to be blamed for the failure of the Copenhagen summit. Thus, few people expected that Obama would actually continue Bush's climate change plan. Already at the beginning of 2009 it was clear that the success of 'Copenhagen' - not just another summit but a crucial one - would depend primarily on the United States, which needed to take a clear leadership role on, in Schwägerl's words, 'a problem that could shake civilization to its very core'. Only if the United States managed to reduce its excessive energy consumption, commit itself to mandatory CO2 emission reduction targets, and help finance poorer countries' move away from oil, there would be a chance that China and

India do the same and a dangerous global warming may be stopped. Yet, about a month before the summit, Obama announced that there would be no binding agreement. It was, according to Schwägerl, 'the admission of a massive failing - and the prelude to a truly dramatic phase of international climate policy'. Obama, who casted himself as a 'citizen of the world' in his 2008 Berlin campaign speech, has, Schwägerl writes, 'neglected the single most important issue for an American president who likes to imagine himself as a world citizen, namely, his country's addiction to fossil fuels and the risks of unchecked climate change'. When push came to shove, domestic issues such as health care reform appeared more important to him than global environmental threats. Obama was either unwilling or unable to convince Democratic skeptics and potential Republican defectors to support him, for example, by promising alternative investments as a compensation for states with large coal reserves. Obama's announcement that it was no longer possible to secure a binding treaty in Copenhagen results from his own negligence. China, India, and other emerging economies have always spoken openly about the fact that the United States, as the world's largest CO2 polluter, should be proactive in committing itself to targets agreed on by the way of international negotiation. Yet, once again, America failed in this respect. The climate change bill that was making its way through Congress did not go nearly far enough - and that, Schwägerl argues, is Obama's fault. While the bill proposed reducing CO2 emissions by a 4 percent relative to 1990 levels, by 2020, climate researchers believe that reductions of 40 percent or more are required. The bill has since been watered-down even more by lobbying interests. Obama has neglected to communicate the importance of climate change to his fellow citizens by speaking about it in a major speech or in his favorite 'town hall' meetings. And Obama has shown 'to be unable to put an end to the lies that modern American society is based on', Schwägerl insists. Obama is

'unable to overcome the entrenched lobbyists of the oil and coal industries and make the reality clear to his compatriots: [t]hey are the worst energy wasters on the planet - and are thus, indirectly, a major threat to world peace in the [twenty-first] century' (Schwägerl 2009).

Surely, then, Schwägerl's verdict is harsh. But we should add that, in May 2011, under Republican and domestic pressure, Obama decided to expand drillings for oil in Alaska and the Mexican Gulf. While this will presumably help to reduce foreign oil dependency, it seems hard to reconcile with Obama's presidential policy of making Americans less dependent on oil and more reliant on clean energy.

Obama's *National Security Strategy* of May 2010 (White House 2010) stresses, first of all, that the United States will continue to underwrite global security, namely through: a commitment to allies, partners, and institutions; a focus on defeating al Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere; a determination to deter aggression; and a strong effort to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation. Thus, a key goal is the renewal of American leadership (seen as grounded in America's leading role in supporting a just and sustainable international order, the universality of its core values, and its unmatched military capabilities) in a strengthened international order, one that can serve common interests such as combating 'violent extremism' (of which it is explicitly denied that it has a religious, let alone Islamic, nature), stopping the spread of nuclear weapons (regarded as a top priority), achieving balanced and sustainable economic growth (as it is believed that the foundation of American leadership must be a prosperous American economy), and forging cooperative solutions to the threat of climate change, armed conflict, and pandemics. The security of the American people is claimed to be the administration's greatest responsibility, but national security and global security are believed to be narrowly intertwined and simultaneously served with more international diplomacy and cooperation, and intensification of the defense of partner countries. Indeed, not only global terrorism is seen as a threat for American security (Bush), but also economic instability, home-grown terrorism, global criminal networks, pandemics, foreign oil dependency, and climate change (seen as a real, urgent, and severe threat for national and global security) - with the latter two requiring in particular the development of clean energy. Preventive attacks and unilateral military actions are regarded as options of last resort (whereas Bush's policy focused on fast military action). While America will not impose any system of government on another country, it will support efforts towards democracy, rule of law, and human rights. More attention is given to China, India, and Brazil as new powers with which good relationships are to be established, which entails the acceptance of a shift in the balance of power from the G8 to the G20. Now, as regards practice, one might typify the essential difference between Obama's foreign policy position and Bush's in the following way. Both try to promote security - first and foremost for Americans and U.S. allies, but also for all other people globally - but whereas Bush, more idealistically, tried to do so through promoting and enforcing democratic regime change, Obama, more pragmatically, tries to do so by promoting and enforcing merely the most basic human right: that of life, broadly understood to include freedom from torture, maiming, and starvation (cf. Etzioni 2011).

As regards the Afghanistan war, whereas Bush's precept was that the United States should engage in a regime change in Afghanistan and 'reconstruct' it, Obama stated that the U.S. goal in Afghanistan ought merely to be 'to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda' (quoted in Etzioni 2011: 99). Obama sent more military personnel to this country and intensified the attacks with unmanned aircrafts. He wanted an 'exit strategy', but not 'withdrawal', as he believed that national security interests - preventing another attack

of U.S. soil - were at stake. He had promised repeatedly during the 2008 campaign that he would intensify U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, and now was doing so (Alter 2010: 367). The United States, Obama concluded, cannot do without a substantial military presence in the region. He never doubted that to make sure that Afghanistan would not relapse into a safe haven for al Qaeda was a fundamental strategic interest (Alter 2010: 374). In September 2009, Obama considered three possibilities, of which he rejected the first two. To defer entirely to his generals was seen by Obama as a resignation of responsibility. To overrule them would weaken their effectiveness, with negative consequences for soldiers on location, relations with allies, and the president's own political position. And how was he going to fire someone so soon after he fired top general David McKiernan in May? Thus, Obama went for his third way, which he undertook as the commander-in-chief, trying to acquire and safeguard his generals' loyalty: 'the most direct assertion of presidential authority over the U.S. military since president Truman fired [general Douglas] MacArthur in 1951' (Alter 2010: 379). He thought hard about Afghanistan and chose for troop escalation, cautiously considering the options of cutting and running or staying at current levels, which were decided to be worse: 'Afghanistan was shaping up as a political loser - another example of Obama making tough decisions that would win him no points' (Alter 2010: 381). Under Bush, the 'Coalition of the Willing' in Iraq had been questionable; for Obama, it was central. He needed to get eight thousand to ten thousand European troops and make international cooperation real, winning the cooperation of old NATO friends (Alter 2010: 381-382). And so, in the autumn of 2009, the result was 'Obama's War', often seen as his 'main Achilles heel', with less progression than expected.

Lastly, I briefly mention Obama's recent policy towards Libya. According to Brooks (2011), the administration's actual policy of intervention starts with a 'humanitarian purpose', with Obama being 'motivated by a noble, open-hearted sentiment: that the U.S. cannot sit by and watch tens of thousands of people get massacred when it has the means to prevent it'. Brooks (2011) explains that, while Obama took this decision 'fully aware that there was no political upside while there were enormous political risks [and] that we don't know much about Libya', he took it 'as an American must - motivated by this country's historical role as a champion of freedom and humanity - and with the awareness that we simply could not stand by with Russia and China in opposition'. But Brooks (2011) adds that, while this decision displays Obama's sensitivity and idealism, the president and the secretary of state also thought practically, reaching a 'hardheaded conclusion': 'If Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi is actively slaughtering his own people, then this endeavor cannot end with a cease-fire that allows him to remain in power. Regime change is the goal of U.S. policy.' The resulting strategy of 'Squeeze and See' is 'meant to signal that Qaddafi has no future', and, 'given all of the uncertainties, this seems like a prudent way to test the strength of the regime and expose its weaknesses' (Brooks 2011). It may turn out that we simply do not have the capacity, short of an actual invasion (that no one wants), to remove Qaddafi. But, at worst, the Libyan people will be no worse off than they were when government forces were bearing down on Benghazi and preparing for slaughter. 'At best, we may help liberate part of Libya or even, if the regime fails, the whole thing,' or so Brooks (2011) thinks. Again, here we have an interesting test case for a Niebuhrian assessment, as Brooks states how Niebuhrian Obama's Libya policy is in his view:

'[T]his is an intervention done in the spirit of Reinhold Niebuhr. It is motivated by a noble sentiment, to combat evil, but it is being done without self-righteousness and with a prudent awareness of the limits and the ironies of history. And it is being done at a moment in history when change in the Arab world really is possible' (Brooks 2011).

### **Assessment**

Let us now turn to the task of applying our set of Niebuhrian Christian realist themes to Obama's presidential policies and actions. First, then, do Obama's policies and actions display real compromise instead of utopianism or doctrine, with no really great inconsistency involved? It seems that much of the compromise instead of utopianism or doctrine theme is present in Obama's health reform project. Clearly, this project has been motivated by concern for the poor in a way that Niebuhr - who, roughly like Obama today, was a man of the left yet somewhat supportive of free market principles (Novak 1991: 329-332; cf. Alter 2010: 173) - may well have appreciated. At the same time, Obama did not simply strive for utopian distributive justice, but also tried to do justice to the freedom rights of those who have the means to close contracts themselves. Arguably, he demonstrated the capability to realistically assess everyone's power, faced the domestic situation as it is rather than as it should be, and showed willingness to compromise. Like Niebuhr, Obama realizes that social justice, to the extent that it is possible at all (also because Obama's health care reformation success would indeed evoke strong resistance from Republican hardliners as regards the rest of his domestic agenda) requires 'compromise' (Alter 2010: 115) as a means to achieve as much common good as possible under the circumstances. As regards the strive for nuclear abandonment, Obama seems to connect realistic steps to an idealistic end-goal. Just as with the eventual acceptance of health care insurance for every American, this combination of dreaming and doing suggests that Obama is able to reach realistic successes, even if this is accompanied by much political tug-of-war (Trouw 2010b), and even if it will not end the threat of a nuclear arms race and nuclear weapons possession by countries.



such as Israel, North Korea, and, presumably, Iran. In fact, after the treaty about strategic nuclear weapons with Russia, a new treaty seems possible: one about tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Accordingly, as regards the disarmament treaty, Obama showed his ability to compromise. The same seems true in case of his Iran policy - in which the direct goal was not the end of Iran's nuclear program but just the avoidance of Iranian nukes weaponizing - and tax law policy, also in combination with the Start Treaty. As regards climate change politics, note first that to strive for a philosophical-ethical utopia of distributive climate justice would not fit in the Niebuhrian framework. Here, too, Obama focused on compromise, taking Congress resistance to be a seriously limiting factor. Whereas fighting global warming was presented as one of the spearheads of Obama's presidency, the Democrats stopped to try to get a climate bill accepted by the Senate. However, Obama seemed to make too much of the 2009 'agreement' between the United States and China - thus, an agreement not within the 'international community' but merely between the world's two biggest polluters - by calling it 'significant' and part of an 'historic endeavor'. Even during the 'Copenhagen' process, there were no serious commitments being offered by the United States at levels necessary to combat dangerous global climate change and so to achieve a compromise in a Niebuhrian spirit, rather than a compromise for the sake of compromise. On the whole, however, it does not seem right to hold that Obama's approach towards climate change contradicts the present theme.

As regards his *National Security Strategy*, while Obama's downplaying of preventive or unilateral military actions is less utopian than Bush's fast military action attitude, it seems questionable whether his continued emphasis on 'global security' is in line with the present utopian theme. Concerning the Afghanistan war, one might think that this war is perhaps too much embedded in that mistakenly utopian strand in the U.S. foreign policy tradition (cf. Niebuhr 1952). Thus, according to Niebuhrian Bacevich (2008), while Obama campaigned on leaving Iraq, when it comes to the war in Afghanistan or military budgets, he continues to spend more money and lives on a delusion that has crippled U.S. foreign policy for decades and will lead to an even greater federal budget deficit than under Bush. In fact, the Obama administration announced plans to increase military spending by 5 percent above what it had averaged during the Bush years. Obama saw the Iraq war as disastrous, but pointed to the need to win the Afghanistan war. What he does not do, Bacevich insists, is to question the logic of configuring U.S. forces for global power projection or the wisdom of maintaining a global military presence. Instead, Obama sent tens of thousands additional troops to Afghanistan in 2009. Perhaps, then, Obama, who wants to stand in the American commitment to 'global security', shares in a six decades old, yet mistaken (given its record of recurring failure and resulting in endless wars), 'sacred trinity': an enduring conviction that international peace and order require the United States to maintain a global military presence, to organize its forces for global power projection, and to counter existing or anticipated threats by relying on a policy of global interventionism (Bacevich 2010). After all, in line with Bush's view, Obama has argued: 'The security and well-being of each and every American depend on the security and well-being of those who live beyond our borders' (quoted in Bacevich 2008: 80). Like Bush, like those who had preceded Bush, Obama defines America's purposes in 'cosmic' terms: 'The mission of the United States is to provide global leadership grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity' (Bacevich 2008: 81; cf. also Obama's *National Security Strategy*). However, even if Bacevich is correct that Obama stayed too close to the 'national security doctrine' tradition in which Bush, too, stood, we would also have to stress that Obama, practically and more pragmatically (compared to Bush) sought a compromise by advancing security through focusing on promoting the basic human right to life only (Etzioni), even if by increasing the number of reinforcements. From the perspective of the present Niebuhrian theme, this may still entail a serious departure from Bush's more utopian aim of regime change. As regards the intervention in Libya, Brooks rightly suggests the presence of at least some Niebuhrian compromise instead of utopianism (no actual invasion). On the other hand, as with any humanitarian intervention, it may still be too utopian. For a Niebuhrian, to think that to interfere militarily in a country that we 'don't know much about', 'motivated by [America's] historical role as a champion of freedom and humanity' is asking for trouble. Even so, we should, I think, conclude that the answer to our first question regarding compromise instead of utopianism or doctrine is yes.

Second, do Obama's policies and actions display genuine moral realism, without displaying really great inconsistency with this Niebuhrian theme? About Obama's health reform project, we may say that there has been considerable moral realism involved. As regards the strive for nuclear abandonment, here Obama shows to be able to reach a realistic successes that may include a decrease of the greatest fear for an international nuclear war. As regards Iran, Obama seriously attempted to be a pragmatic realist both aware of the nuclear and terrorist-sponsoring dangers from the Iranian regime and sensitive to arguably legitimate energy demands of the Iranian nation. As regards climate change politics, I think we must say that Obama's policy attitude towards this very important issue seems strongly inconsistent with our present theme, as it reveals a realism that may not be called moral. Arguably, 'Copenhagen' was of historical importance, although perhaps European expectations were unrealistic also because of the European Union's own ineffective performance. And arguably, moral realism would not tolerate ignoring or downplaying the issue, but demand at least an approach of enlightened self-interest, as climate change, roughly like nuclear weapons (albeit less immediately so), may be involved in destroying civilizations,

considering its bad consequences. Obama's agreement with China was not only shaky but unduly 'easy', and his indulgence towards the U.S. Senate - undoubtedly, a seriously limiting factor - unduly great. Obama, the 'world citizen', did not signal a message of American national egoism and the need for truly moral behavior to Congress and the American public. Remarkably, at least in case of his climate change policy, is that he does not do anything against that very project of Republicans and Democrats alike: 'members of the present generation have [remorselessly] plundered the inheritance of their children and grandchildren' (Bacevich 2010: 246), and, one may add, of the children and grandchildren of people elsewhere, too. Indeed, Obama's climate politics attitude, while it could not bypass the force of U.S. self-interest, seems too national egoistic, with him showing little or no sensitivity to Niebuhr's sin-based critique of collective egoism. In 'Copenhagen', there were no serious commitments being offered by the United States at levels necessary to combat dangerous global climate change. Perhaps we should even concur with Schwägerl that Obama has his priorities wrong, in caring more about health care reform domestically - on which there was also strong Congress resistance - than about fighting climate change globally.

As regards Obama's *National Security Strategy*, on the one hand it stresses the link between American security and, practically, the promotion of basic security rights of people around the globe, but on the other hand it betrays a unduly quick and convenient move from the American special responsibility in case of climate change to the need for international cooperation and the responsibilities of all states. As regards the Afghanistan war, one might think that Obama should have chosen a 'new trinity', as Bacevich (2010) suggests: (i) the purpose of the U.S. military is not to combat evil or remake the world, but to defend the United States and its most vital interests (so the United States should maintain only those forces required to accomplish the defense establishment's core mission); (ii) the primary duty station of the American soldier is in America (so U.S. troops should withdraw from the Persian Gulf and Central Asia forthwith); (iii) the United States should employ force only as a last resort and only in self-defense (the Bush Doctrine of preventive war is a moral and strategic abomination, the very inverse of prudent and enlightened statecraft). Yet, again, even if Bacevich is ultimately correct, we would have to note that Obama seems at best more morally realistic than Bush in focusing on basic security promotion only (without requiring regime change), and at worst not truly inconsistent with our present theme. In agreement with Brooks, I think that (multilateral) humanitarian interventions such as this one in Libya may correspond to the theme of moral realism and are at least not inconsistent with it. In conclusion, we should, I think, say that the answer to our second question regarding moral realism tends towards no, given the moral importance of global climate change as a phenomenon that (as Obama himself acknowledges) threatens human security worldwide, and the inconsistency involved.

Third, do Obama's policies and actions display real awareness of the need for power, free from really great inconsistency? Clearly, the need for power theme is present in Obama's health reform project. Indeed, again like Niebuhr, Obama appears aware that social justice, to the extent that it can be achieved, will only occur through power (cf. Alter 2010: 115). Indeed, power politics seemed to have made a serious difference here. As regards his strive for nuclear abandonment, the disarmament treaty, Iran policy, and *National Security Strategy*, if one could not positively concur with (some of) this from a Niebuhrian perspective, one may at least agree that there seems to be no inconsistency at all with the need for power use. In fact, Obama's security-driven, increased attention for China, India, and Brazil, and decreased attention for Europe suggests that he follows Niebuhr's argument that the only way of pursuing international order is by maintaining a fundamental balance of power among states. As regards the Copenhagen climate summit, here, too, Obama (and secretary of state Clinton) realized that they had to use power to make China accept the registry. Concerning the Afghanistan war, Obama concluded that a substantially increased regional presence of the U.S. military was needed to keep al Qaeda in check. As regards 'Libya', Brooks rightly points to the need for and use of power ('squeeze and see') during the intervention. Thus, we may conclude that the answer to our third question regarding the need for power is yes.

Fourth, do Obama's policies and actions display genuine awareness of the moral limits of political action, with no really great inconsistency involved? Arguably, Obama's health reform plan, even if ambitious, entails modest reform instead of grandiose renewal, which is also why it could have success. As regards the strive for nuclear abandonment, just as with health care reform, this combination of dreaming and doing suggests that Obama is realistically able to achieve modest successes. Again, it could at least diminish the greatest fear for an international nuclear war. As regards the disarmament treaty, Obama seemed to act in a way consistent with this theme. As regards his attitude towards climate change politics, Obama has not acted inconsistently with the theme of the limits of political action, albeit his stance (whereas, again, European expectations might have been unrealistically high) is probably too limited, if not showing 'false modesty', also because fighting global warming was one of the spearheads of his own presidency. As regards Obama's *National Security Strategy*, there seems to be no (drastic) inconsistency with our Niebuhrian theme, at least when compared to Bush's security policy. Concerning the Afghanistan war, perhaps this war remains embedded in an overestimation of what political action can do, if Bacevich (2008, 2010) is right (see above). Yet, and again, a point in Obama's favor is that he trimmed back Bush's

precept of an American engagement in regime change to the more modest goal of containing and crippling al Qaeda. Also, persistently believing that American withdrawal was too ambitious and risky, he opted for the more modest goal of an exit strategy instead. As regards 'Libya', unlike Brooks, I think that humanitarian interventions such as this one, aimed at achieving regime change, contradict the moral limits of political action. For a Niebuhrian, it is dangerous to trust one's own more or less 'pure' intentions, and to think that to interfere militarily in a country that we 'don't know much about' may be beyond the limits of political action. On the other hand, the inconsistency involved should not be given too much weight, as at least no grand invasion is taking place. Thus, I conclude that the answer to our fourth question regarding the moral limits of political action is slightly closer to yes than to no.

Fifth, do Obama's policies and actions display a real sense of the need for humility, without really great inconsistency involved? Humility does not really seem present in Obama's health reform project, but that also seems by no means inconsistent with this theme. As regards the strive for nuclear abandonment and the disarmament treaty, more or less the same seems true. Considering his overall attitude towards climate change politics, I think we have to say that Obama, as U.S. president, has acted in strong contradiction to the humility theme. Now it is primarily because of American - and, of course, broadly Western - values, ideas, and behavior that the world has come to face a global climate change that ultimately endangers human civilization itself. Yet Obama's climate policy, like his climate change rhetoric, stresses everyone's responsibility too much and America's own special responsibility too little. In both, the Niebuhrian emphasis on self-sin, self-critique, and national egoism was just as absent as it seemed called for. As regards his climate politics during his first years in office, Obama showed no serious practical awareness of America-caused (or even Western-caused) global climate injustice. While this does not mean that he should have adopted Schwägerl's 'lies [of] modern American society' terminology, it does seem anything but humble to speak of the 2009 agreement between the United States and China in terms of it being 'significant' for the 'international community' and promising an 'historic endeavor'. If it were impossible for Obama to cut back America's own carbon dioxide emissions drastically and quickly or to point at the need for Americans to pursue a more modest life-style (whatever other countries may do) because of domestic resistance, he could still have humbly acknowledged somehow that as a political leader he is incapable of achieving a decrease of global insecurity this way. Instead, in practice as well as rhetoric, he simply treats the American way of life as something beyond excuse. As regards Obama's *National Security Strategy* and 'Obama's war' in Afghanistan, if Bacevich (2008) is correct, here we do not seem to find an attitude of serious humility. Yet, even if Obama thereby stands in a tradition of national hubris, it is still the case that his own performance, when compared to Bush's, does not seem inconsistent with the present theme. As regards 'Libya', Brooks, I think, is wrong to detect Niebuhrian humility in Obama's policy. To rely on one's own more or less pure intentions and to demand regime change, especially when 'motivated by [America's] historical role as a champion of freedom and humanity', seems to display sanctimony rather than humility. Thus, I conclude that the answer to our fifth question regarding the need for humility tends towards no.

Sixth, do Obama's policies and actions display real responsible political action taking, free from really great inconsistency? To begin with, Obama more or less kept his own rigid timetable to withdraw American troops from Iraq, which seems positive from the political responsibility perspective. During the health reform process, Obama clearly showed an ability to act with responsibility. He did not only harness power in the service of justice, he also acted courageously - against the views of several advisers, with a bad track record of Democratic presidents behind him, facing Congress resistance, while risking popularity and re-election failure. And he acted with adequate speed, knowing that such a big initiative could only be successful if carried out early in his administration period. As regards the strive for nuclear abandonment, Obama took his responsibility towards the achievement of a new Start Treaty of disarmament. As regards climate change politics, here it seems at least clear that Obama has not acted out of an attitude of (special) responsibility, especially given the historical importance of 'Copenhagen', the fact that fighting global warming was one of the guiding premises of his presidency, and the vast contribution of the United States to the climate problem. Arguably, the world had every reason to expect ethical leadership from the United States, with Obama presenting himself as an advocate of hope and one who promised to make the United States a responsible participant of the international climate regime. Instead, Obama, who wanted all states to take their responsibility, did not seem to take the climate crisis seriously enough himself and to lead his own state towards a more responsible stance. Consistent with his *National Security Strategy*, which stresses American leadership and responsibility for global as well as national security, Obama, I think, acted with responsibility as regards the Afghanistan war. It is true that he did not question the logic of configuring U.S. forces for global power projection; accordingly, he did not consider the option of 'getting out' (Bacevich 2008). Yet, here Obama practiced what he preached, sending more soldiers to Afghanistan because he felt this war to be necessary for American and global security. And again when compared to his predecessor, he did not resign responsibility by deferring entirely to his generals and their military wishes, but attempted to take command himself and even succeeded in gaining more support from NATO allies. Concerning Libya, Brooks understandably points to the Niebuhrian theme of responsible political action in Obama's intervention, although the extent of the 'responsible' is questionable. To think that to interfere militarily in an unknown country does not seem very responsible in a Niebuhrian sense. In

conclusion, the answer to our sixth question regarding the need for responsible political action cannot be yes, but it is not no either.

Seventh, do Obama's policies and actions display genuine realistic firmness and hope, with no really great inconsistency involved? Although this theme applies originally to international politics, it might be appropriate to say that Obama's health reform project, as that was clearly motivated by justice and carried out swiftly, shows considerable realistic firmness and hope. As regards the strive for nuclear abandonment, Obama's realist approach within an idealist overall perspective, even if it will not end the threat of a nuclear arms race and nuclear weapons possession by particular states, arguably diminishes the danger for an international nuclear war and so contributes positively to realistic firmness and hope. Indeed, this applies concretely to the disarmament treaty Obama has managed to achieve. Yet, and again, climate change is the weak spot. Despite his own emphasis on the importance of fighting climate change, Obama achieved no serious result in Copenhagen, showed no awareness of American injustice in this regard, and failed to give a message of hope to the rest of the world. Indeed, rather like his predecessor Bush, he presented no outlook at all to a future world order characterized by order and, especially, international justice. Thus, here Obama seems at least to have taken away from realistic firmness and hope. As regards Obama's *National Security Strategy*, the Afghanistan war, and the Libya intervention, it is hard to say whether such strategies and actions contribute to realistic firmness and hope. However, they do not seem to be grossly inconsistent with the present theme. Thus, I would suggest that the answer to our seventh question regarding realistic firmness and hope is somewhere in the middle between yes and no, noting that this answer is rather disappointing if we take Obama's own persistent emphasis on 'hope' into account.

I conclude that, concerning his domestic and foreign policies and actions, Obama has shown clear Niebuhrian influence, but not to the extent that this influence may be called real without really great inconsistency. Again, he appears largely at odds especially with moral realism and humility as themes of special importance.

### Conclusion

If we consider the above inquiries, what, then, is to be our final, qualitative and holistic, Niebuhrian judgment about Obama's rise and presidency so far? While Obama has displayed clear, authentic Niebuhrian influence, his way into the presidency hitherto, this article suggests, does not appear satisfactory by Niebuhrian standards, in particular because themes of special importance such as moral realism and need for humility seem inadequately assimilated. In his words and deeds, Obama's moral outlook seems too liberal (humanitarian intervention, climate change policy) and national egoistic (climate change discourse and policy) from a Niebuhrian Christian realist perspective. I am aware to have emphasized the historically 'new' issue of global climate change rather strongly. However, it seems to me that the many commentators on the 'Obama-Niebuhr relationship' have generally neglected this far-reaching matter, which is in need of proactive U.S. leadership and rightly seen by Obama himself as a global danger and policy priority. From a Niebuhrian perspective, American action on the problem, if not the crisis, of global climate change should presumably not, as Obama tends to do, be reduced to a matter of technology policies and international cooperation calls - although it will be that, too. Arguably, it should be understood as something more than that, as a deeper moral and theological issue, as one that has, at least to some extent, to do with sin, as evil rooted in the refusal to accept boundedness, self-centeredness or pride; and this 'more' seems inappropriately absent in Obama's rhetoric and policy. Indeed, while it cannot ignore U.S. self-interest, his presidency shows undue respect for American habits and values, whereas perhaps climate change - rooted in a well-intentioned American effort to develop fossil fuel use for American and global welfare achievement (cf. Novak 1991: 299-300), which, however, (also) resulted, through an American (and broadly Western) 'materialism' that Niebuhr (1952) criticized, in bad national and global consequences - symbolizes the ultimate 'irony of American history'. If this is correct, then Obama, while anything but an 'atheist for Niebuhr' and emphatically acknowledging the role of evil everywhere in the world, has not shown to have really absorbed the Niebuhrian emphasis on sin. As with the Nobel Peace Prize, president Obama still has to demonstrate that he earns the predicate 'Niebuhrian'.

My account in this article has been incomplete, with an outcome that is tentative rather than final. I accept that it is susceptible to extension, if not serious criticism. Nevertheless, I dare say that the burden of proof lies with critics of this article and the provisional contribution it has aimed to make.

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### Notes

[1] One might, though, mention the recent workshop The Niebuhrian Moment, Then and Now: Religion, Democracy, and Political Realism, held at Princeton University on 24 February 2011, see: [http://uchv.princeton.edu/lectures\\_seminars/political\\_thought/niebuhr\\_moment.php](http://uchv.princeton.edu/lectures_seminars/political_thought/niebuhr_moment.php).

[2] I am grateful to Simon Polinder and Niebuhr expert Ruurd Veldhuis for their ideas and input. Polinder's (Dutch written) article on Obama and Niebuhr (Polinder 2009), and Veldhuis's dissertation on Niebuhr (Veldhuis 1975) have been very stimulating for me to write the present article. I thank Polinder and my colleague Nienke De Deugd for their helpful comments. The main title of this article is playfully derived from the 2002 music documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*. Early in his career, from 1915 until 1928, Niebuhr served as pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, a city well-known as 'Motown', also the name of Detroit's legendary record label which was to become so successful during the 1960s and early 1970s.

[3] While, I think, Julian (2009) overplays the extent of discontinuity in Niebuhr's ideas - at least at a more basic level - and unduly quickly accuses Obama of having read Niebuhr's work selectively, his warning against the very enterprise of examining the impact of Niebuhr on Obama is well-taken. A rather 'dynamic' approach that is not fully rigorous cannot be avoided.

[4] For a remarkable attempt to broadly *understand* Obama as a thinker, writer, and politician by locating him in the frameworks of the history of American democracy, the tradition of philosophical pragmatism, and the intellectual turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s, see Kloppenberg (2011). Being primarily concerned with an *evaluation* (from a Niebuhrian perspective) of Obama's personal development, words, and deeds, I have a different approach in this article than Kloppenberg has in his reconstruction of Obama's wider intellectual background.

[5] When describing and interpreting Obama's personal development, rhetoric, policies, and actions later in this article, I shall - also in order to keep things manageable - rely rather heavily on the accounts of Remnick (2010), Alter (2010), and (contemporary Niebuhrian) Bacevich (2008, 2010). While these accounts seem reliable and comprehensive (although Alter seems to show a bit too much sympathy for president Obama at times) and have generally been well-received, it is true that this reliance limits the scope and depth of my own approach in a way.

[6] For this theme and the next three ones I draw rather heavily on Mark Amstutz's helpful account (Amstutz 2008).

[7] See for a transcript, e.g., Steven Waldman, 'Obama's fascinating interview with Cathleen Falsani', <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/11/obamas-interview-with-cathleen.html>.

[8] Alter (2010: 226-227, 303) does mention Niebuhr and his potential influence on Obama.

[9] Many of the quotations that now follow are from influential people who have come to know Obama. The figures given are page numbers of Remnick's book.

[10] Interestingly, a well-known textbook on international relations theory has come to include Obama's entire Nobel Prize speech as its only original text by a state leader in its latest edition (Viotti and Kauppi 2012: 430-436).

[11] Would Niebuhr, critical as he was of the strong reliance on science in modern society, himself dispute the scientific pretension to establish with great precision the occurrence of human-induced global climate change, were he alive today? Such a question could raise complex issues that I cannot take up here. What matters for my purpose is that it would not seem sensible to turn Niebuhr's critical attitude towards science into a theme of a Niebuhrian political ethics and that 'climate skepticism', as Obama (and Niebuhrian Bacevich) would acknowledge, is simply no credible political option at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

[12] To quote Niebuhr (1959: 291): '[The religious dimension of human existence] can be both destructive and creative. It is creative when an ultimate norm or value is set in judgment over the historically relative and ambiguous achievements of man's existence. It is destructive and a source of evil if a simple identification is made between the ultimate norm and the norms and values which we cherish.'

[13] As Obama himself put it in *The Audacity of Hope*: 'If the prospect of melting ice caps, rising sea levels, changing weather patterns, more frequent hurricanes, more violent tornadoes, endless dust storms, decaying forests, dying coral reefs, and increases in respiratory illness and insect-borne diseases - if all that doesn't constitute a serious threat, I don't know what does' (2006: 168; cf. also 2009b).

[14] For a brief critical analysis of the extent to which Obama's understanding of hope is really Niebuhrian, see Stroup (2009).

[15] Closing Guantánamo is 'a long shot', Defense Secretary Robert Gates declared in February 2011.

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